A SENIOR SECTION SECOND TO NONE

Football for boys who remained in school beyond the statutary leaving age has always been important and strong in the County, “Over Age” football as it was first called may at first conjure images of men with long, below-the- knee length shorts, and harlequin coloured shirts buttoned up to the neck, caps with tassles and high above the ankle leather boots. But the “Over-age” section has always been strong.

The early “Senior” football was for the Grammar Schools as they were the only establishments where boys stayed in school beyond the age of fifteen, which became sixteen in 1971. Names like Heaton, St.Cuthberts and Ashington dominated the newly organized competitions which began life in the 1960s. These Grammar Schools competed for the Syd Hunter Cup (Syd was Head of PE.at Rutherford Grammar) and then in 1967-68, the Evening Chronicle Cup which was begun so that the winner could qualify to play in a new National Under 18 competition launched by the English Schools Football Association.(ESFA)

The advent of comprehensive education, in the early seventies, opened up football to more schools, at this level. Demand rose, and it was then that Northumberland County began to emerge as a powerhouse in the north, through the Northern Counties SFA, and then on the national stage.

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In 1971 The Senior Schools Association merged with the Northumberland County Schools Football Association allowing one body to oversee all football played in Schools throughout the County.

The Senior Schools FA always had a great competitive edge, and the top prize was “The Evening Chronicle Cup”. In its first year, 1967-68, it was won by the formidable team from Ashington Grammar School, a feat repeated the following season. The same school were also the first winners of a new novelty competition in 1969-70 when they won the inaugural Seven-a-Side Tournament. This was played off over one Saturday morning and it is still is an important and enjoyable opener to the season, just as the Evening Chronicle Cup is still a very highly valued Trophy to win.

Heaton Grammar School won their final trophies in this era before going comprehensive when they won the 7-a-side in both 1969-70 and again in 1970-71 to go with the Syd Hunter Cup in that second year. Paul Cannell was a brilliant goalscoring forward for them and he represented his County and Country before going on to a professional career that included Newcastle United along the way.

The Final of the Chronicle Cup in 1971 saw a changing of the guard in Northumberland Senior Schools football. In a match played at Hunters Moor, St Cuthberts emerged to challenge the old hegemony of Ashington. A stirring, rousing match played a few days after Christmas saw Saints triumph 3-2, and they did not look back for some considerable time.

In that same season, 1971-2 another first came in the Syd Hunter Cup, a knock out competition played in the Spring term, when one of the new comprehensives, Willington High from Wallsend, took home the trophy.

Walbottle High School had two very fine years in 1974-75 and 1975-76 winning the Evening Chronicle Cup in both years, the Seven-a-side Tournament and then swept all before them in becoming English National Schools Champions.

They were not, however, the first Northumberland school to be national champions. The English Schools Football Association had introduced a National Individual Schools Cup competition for Under 18 players in 1967-68. Two years later, in 1969-70 St.Cuthberts Grammar were joint champions, when they drew in the Final against St.Michaels of Leeds; and in their team that season was a youthful David Stapylton, later to manage St.Cuthberts to many triumphs and also to become Chairman of the County Association. They again shared the National Trophy in 1980-81 but ended their long wait for National honours in 2000-01, claiming the right be National Champions of England in their own right.

Recognising the growing power and dominance of the ever expanding tertiary colleges, ESFA in 1996 decided to set up a new competition for Schools Teams where the establishment had to have scholars below the age of sixteen .The first such competition took place in 1996-97 when another Northumberland School, Monkseaton High School from Whitley Bay were joint national champions. Monkseaton later became the most successful school in the competition history when they went on to win it outright in both 2005-06 and 2006-07.

In 1982-83 to provide variety, the NSFA set up an Under 18 League competition, playing for the retained Syd Hunter Trophy and it was won by St.Cuthberts, by now a High School.. Many believe it was the establishment of this League which provided the impetus for the County team to progress to the level it did as you will read shortly.

The league was certainly successful, as by 1998-99 a second division had to be formed as so many teams wanted to play football at this age level. Seaton Burn High School were its first champions and were promoted to the top division. St.Cuthberts were the most successful school in the first part of these competitions but of late, Monkseaton High have been quite dominant winning several League titles, Evening Chronicle Cups and 7-a-side tournaments. These victories included winning “The Treble” in 2005-06,2006-07 and 2009-10. These things seem cyclical and who knows where the next dominant team will come from?

A County representative team representing Northumberland was in evidence in the mid 1960’s under the control of the Grammar Schools Association which in that period became the Northumberland Senior Schools Association. They played friendly games against other local County teams and versus a team representing Northumberland Youth. The County did not attend the very first ‘Schools Week’ in 1965 due to “financial considerations” but then attended almost every other such event, later called the “Festival of Football”, until the sad demise of what was a marvellous advert for Schools Football after 2004.

By the mid 1970’s Inter-County football was becoming well organized and Northumberland won their first competitive Trophy in 1976-77 when they took the Northern Counties Title with a team which included two Under 18 internationals in Barry Knox (Tynemouth College) and Ian Donaldson (St.Cuthberts). By now matches were being played against County teams from across the north of England, and also against a variety of Scottish County teams.

However it was not until 1986-87 that the “Golden Age “ of Northumberland Senior Schools Football began. It was in that season that the County won the ESFA National Title. To do so meant finishing in the top two of the qualifying east side competition of The Northern Counties competition, and then winning through against the west side qualifiers, before entering the National Knock –out stages.

The final that year was a tense affair at Blyth Spartans F.C. v Hertfordshire and only a last minutes penalty by Shaun Murray saw the hosts through. In that same season Stephen Coxon (Longbenton H.S.) set a record by scoring 10 goals in competitive matches that would stand for many years until beaten by Phil Bannister (Monkseaton H.S.) who scored 14 in 2006-07. This was also in a National Final season but in this case, a losing one when we went down to Sussex at Stoke City F.C.

Following their win v Hertfordshire we were at it again the very next year, 87-88, when Avon were sent packing at Bath City F.C. The only goal of that final scored by Sean Boyle(St.Benet Biscops). In 1989-90 we lost for the first time in a National Final going down 3-1 to Greater Manchester at Stockport County by 3 goals to 1. That squad included six players who would go on to have successful professional careers (Paul Stoneman, Robbie Elliott, Stephen Watson, John Watson, Graeme Fenton and Alan Thompson) and three players who gained Under 18 caps for England (Ian Dunbar, Michael Dancer and Alistair Hails).

Their demolition of a very strong Essex side in the semi-final of the national competition at St.James Park by 4-1 was one of the finest displays of schoolboy football ever witnessed. Essex were also the opponents the next season in the national Final, again at St.James Park but a 1-1- draw meant the Trophy was shared. Five tears later in 1996 the same teams met yet again in a national final this time at Southend F.C. when another 1-1 draw resulted. But in 1998 Essex gained their revenge by defeating Northumberland 2-1 at West Ham United. In 1999 we again were in the National Final drawing 0-0 with Dorset at Berwick Rangers . What a record that was in the nineties.

By now Northumberland were by some distance, the most successful County side in the country, and the new millennium did not bring an end to the amazing run of national finals. In 2007, we lost 3-1 to Sussex in the Final, but two years later, in 2009, walloped Hampshire 4-0 at Luton Town’s quaint ground.

Repeated National success, with a record absolutely second to none, based on a very strong under 18 league competition inside Northumberland are things to celebrate in the Centenary Year. Who knows what the next period will bring. ? What is certain is that it is very highly unlikely that any other County in England will reach the heights of success that has been established and maintained by Northumberland at the Senior Age Group of Schools Football.

# Alan Heads

ESFA Council member

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